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THE HOMELESS

BY STUART A. RICE,

Formerly Superintendent, New York Municipal Lodging House.¹

Intelligent treatment of homeless men and women requires a vivid understanding of the reasons for their homelessness. Under present methods of industrial management this condition is demanded of a vast number of workers. By becoming or remaining homeless, they render specialized services of great importance to society. Nevertheless, the living and working conditions under which the services are performed react disastrously upon their character, even to making them subjects of social case treatment!

The truth of these statements is to be illustrated in the employment office districts of any large city. A recent inspection of the labor agencies from Fourteenth Street to Chatham Square, along the Bowery in New York, disclosed, in all, opportunities for fourteen men with families! And these were required to be "foreigners!" The thousands of other jobs offered (tacitly understood, not openly stated) were for "homeless men only."

THE HOMELESS IN RELATION TO SOCIETY AND INDUSTRY

The writer has been a member of one of those unkempt companies you have seen slouching along the street from the labor agency to the railroad depot. He has made his abode in the bunk houses provided for these men. His experiences have led him to a real appreciation of the abnormal living conditions that are forced upon great masses of casual and seasonal workers throughout America. Many of the evils inevitably resulting from these unnatural conditions may be removed in individual cases by careful diagnosis and persistent social treatment. But the background of industrial organization (or disorganization) will in nowise be altered by the most careful case work. Either the men and women recorded in our own case files, or thousands of others like them, will still be compelled to live abnormal lives in order that they may live at all.

¹ At the time of writing this article Mr. Rice was still holding this position.
—EDITOR.

Homeless men are demanded to build the bridges and tunnels, the irrigation systems and railroads, to harvest our forests and embank our rivers. They are the pioneers of modern industry. They go hither and thither to the rough, unfinished, uncomfortable places of the world, to provide homes and civilized comforts for those of us who follow. Meanwhile they live in bunk houses. Homeless women are preferred to do the "dirty work" in our public institutions and to scrub and clean at night in our hotels. Generally only they are willing to accept the work and the hours demanded.

Homeless men, for the most part, make up our "labor reserve." This reserve is highly essential. If some workers were not unemployed in slack or normal conditions of industry, additional hands could not be employed in periods of increased activity. The homeless are usually the less efficient. Furthermore, they are without dependents. Socially and economically, therefore, as things now are, it is advantageous for society that they shall be the first employes discharged when reductions in force are essential and likewise the last to be reemployed.

Homelessness and intermittent employment, therefore, go together. They are the major characteristics demanded by society of a large number of its workers. But certain other characteristics are encouraged. In the absence of organized social control over industry a restless instability of temperament is desirable to afford fluidity to the labor supply. Employes' indifference to cleanliness is fortunate for numerous employers who find it impracticable to supply bunk houses with running water. Even the periodical debauch in the city after pay day has psychological results which prove convenient to the employer. Men or women without money are docile. How otherwise could they be induced to return to jobs affording no chance of normal living? These unfortunate developments of habit and character we attempt to combat in individuals by social case treatment. Yet, they are in a sense vital elements in our patients' professional training!

CLASSIFICATION OF THE HOMELESS

It is convenient to use the following grouping employed by Mrs. Alice Willard Solenberger:² (1) the self-supporting; (2) the temporarily dependent; (3) the chronically dependent; (4) the parasitic.

² A. W. Solenberger, "One Thousand Homeless Men," p. 10.

We may say with approximate correctness that in the order named, these classes mark the degrees of progressive deterioration through which every homeless individual *tends* to pass. That more men and women of the first two groups do not actually pass into the third and fourth is a sure evidence of fundamental human character. Everything in the lives of homeless men and women drives them in the direction of chronic dependency and parasitism. Many fight on against odds, day after day, to retain their precarious foothold upon the social ladder; others go down in the struggle, their spirits unbroken to the end. Still others, "exhausted by three or four generations of overwork, on the slightest menace of lowering prices the first to be discharged,"³ prove easy victims to the disintegrating tendencies of their environment.

THE GENERAL AIMS OF CASE TREATMENT

The first requirement in social treatment of the homeless adult is to check his progressive deterioration toward chronic dependency or parasitism. Existing facilities for constructive treatment are very meagre. Our efforts are everywhere counteracted by the encouragement which society gives to the very tendencies in our patient that we desire to eliminate. If we are dealing with large numbers of the homeless we cannot expect a restoration to normal living in more than a small proportion of cases. The best work we can do at present, therefore, is to assist the bulk of our patients to "hold their own."

Another general objective is in reality a matter of diagnosis rather than of treatment. In any group of homeless individuals there may be singled out proper cases for specialized treatment in which homelessness is a factor of minor significance. The sick, insane, feeble-minded, blind, handicapped, inebriate and immigrant are regarded as such typical cases in the volume of which this article forms a part. All of these are found among the homeless applicants for shelter or relief at any municipal lodging house or charity application bureau. Many lost and broken fragments of families may be recovered from among the homeless. Married men or women, and boys who have run away from homes, will always be discovered if applicants are carefully interviewed. As soon as the

³ Edmund Kelly, "The Elimination of the Tramp," p. 4.

facts in these cases are ascertained, the problems become those of family case treatment and should be referred to a family agency.

With the development of facilities for diagnosis and with the building of additional agencies for specialized treatment, the social function of an agency or institution for the homeless will become primarily that of a clearing house. In every way afforded them social case workers should further the breaking up of our homeless group into its component parts.

TREATMENT OF THE SELF-SUPPORTING

The most numerous group of homeless, employed persons with whom I am acquainted is that which is known at the New York Municipal Lodging House as "the Saturday night clean-ups." The registration of applicants is proverbially largest on Saturday nights. The men responsible for the increase are generally employed through the week, usually at odd jobs that must be "caught" each morning. Consequently, by seeking a free bed and meals at the Municipal Lodging House on Saturday night, the earnings of that day may be reserved for Sunday's living expenses. Some wish to "see the doctor"; others want to "get a bath and fumigation," in order to rid themselves of vermin acquired in cheap commercial lodging houses; still others desire to have their clothing washed in the laundry of the institution. Women frequently are led to our doors from the same motives.

The problem here represented is primarily one of labor and housing rather than of social case work. There is no formula of social case treatment for the needs of these men and women. Most of them are independent in attitude and fairly self-satisfied regarding their economic and social status. They will not accept services from the institution other than those they request. If molested by "social service busy-bodies" they will not return, and whatever opportunity existed for their physical and moral sanitation will have been lost. However, if their "clean up" is supplemented by a friendly but impersonal welcome the institution may at least continue to be a very important agent in community sanitation.

A group of self-supporting men and women more susceptible to case treatment than those described above, is illustrated by the low paid hospital helper employes of the public charitable institutions of New York City. Customarily they are recruited from the

patients and inmates of the institutions themselves. They work for a much lower rate of compensation than is paid for equivalent services elsewhere, and they are recognized officially by the City of New York as a distinct type of semi-dependent employe.

In his dual capacity of employer and landlord, the head of an institution is in a position to render social service to these employes of a kind impossible when they are patients, inmates, or applicants for relief. The Municipal Lodging House recognized this fact in the formulation of a definite policy regarding the filling of positions within the institution; so far as efficiency in administration permits, the Social Service Bureau is the employing agency for these house positions. Lodgers who show possibilities of reclamation become our employes. As soon as possible they are promoted, and eventually are placed in permanent outside employment, carefully selected for its influence upon their habits. In this manner, similar opportunities are continually made for other lodgers.

It is most essential for the success of this program of social service to employes that group loyalty and group interests be developed. Frequent meetings of employes should be held at which common problems of organization and management may be discussed in a democratic way. Outdoor athletic sports are invaluable as a means of promoting loyalty. Holidays may be the occasion of gatherings at which songs, instrumental music, recitations and special features will supplant the institutional atmosphere with that of a community festival.

If regular recreational and educational opportunities are not to be had at the institution they will be sought in the corner saloons. Various clubs are practicable. A large reading and smoking room provided with books, papers, magazines, writing materials and games is a popular success at our Municipal Lodging House. I was once complimented by an unpaid employe for the choice selection of Greek and Latin poets upon our shelves. He chanced to be a former Yale man. The books (received in a donation of cast-off materials) had given him many hours of intellectual pleasure!

Supervision of employes' expenditures is helpful in many instances. Some have never learned the value of money and spend it foolishly. Others are unable to withstand the temptations of drink. Employes at the Municipal Lodging House are encouraged to deposit their earnings with me for the purchase of necessities, for transfer to

a bank, or for investment in War Savings Stamps. A positive gain in self-respect is evident in the individual who has purchased clothing or accumulated savings. In some cases I have found it desirable to keep employes continuously in debt to me by advancing them money for legitimate objects. The amount due is later deducted from their salaries. The invitation to membership in the Red Cross was recently accepted by five-sixths of the hospital helper employes of the Municipal Lodging House, but a small proportion of whom were receiving in excess of twenty dollars per month.

The development of a system of credit or of token money, such as has been found effective at Sing Sing, would be of the utmost value in the rehabilitation of these men and women. The object of such a system would be to pay employes in the things they require—tobacco, clothing, shoes, moving picture tickets, etc. The present cash salary payment is in reality an inducement to spend the month's wages in one grand debauch. Saloon keepers in the neighborhood of public institutions habitually ascertain when employes are to be paid and are shortly after in possession of a large part of their earnings.

Appeals for assistance are often received from men or women who have paid employment but who are temporarily without funds. It should be the policy of a social agency to extend whatever credit is needed by these individuals for necessities. This should be a business transaction throughout and the suggestion of charity eliminated. The individual to whom credit is advanced may be placed upon his honor to repay the loan when he is paid. Upon their verbal promise to repay the institution, a number of men holding positions receive maintenance at the New York Municipal Lodging House every month. The independent and self-respecting manner in which some of these men walk up to the counter to pay their bills speaks for the effectiveness of the method.

THE TEMPORARILY DEPENDENT

The demoralizing effect of involuntary unemployment on individual character is not due to the absence of employment itself, but rather to the inevitable *consequences* of its absence. It is due to the enforced lowering of living standards and to the worry and uncertainty of seeking another job. Even the most callous man or

woman is sensitive to continued rebuffs in a fruitless search for work. I know of nothing that will so quickly shatter the self-respect that is essential to a freeborn individual.

A period of unemployment from which these consequences are removed, in other words a *vacation*,—is considered to be of greatest value for the worker's reinvigoration. It follows that if unemployment could be relieved of its present psychical and material results, it might become a boon rather than a curse to the worker.

The responsibility for finding a new job, therefore, must be lifted from the individual who is out of work, and placed upon an employment exchange. It logically follows that the responsibility for his efficient physical maintenance while unemployed must also be removed from the individual. He may then utilize his period of unemployment as a time of physical and mental reinvigoration. Good food, recreational facilities and positive educational opportunities in a broad sense may result in a refreshed, better equipped individual when the next job is found, rather than in a weakened, discouraged and less efficient worker.

There is an apparent danger that in this shifting of responsibility the unemployed individual may become pauperized. No system which maintains a worker in physical and mental efficiency during idleness can have this result to the same degree as one which allows him to deteriorate and lose physical and mental efficiency. Nevertheless, he should be made to feel his own responsibility toward the agency that has assumed the risks of his unemployment. A work requirement clearly sufficient to pay the costs of the advantages received is one means of avoiding any pauperizing tendency. If this is impracticable, the individual should be obligated to repay this expense when he is once more employed.

Many periodical drinkers may be classed as temporarily dependent during lapses from sobriety for the reason that during the greater part of the time they are self-supporting. Their contact with social agencies usually occurs immediately following a periodical spree while they are still recovering from its effects. The victim is invariably repentant. Advice, moral suasion and "preaching" at this time are usually quite useless, as the convalescent will go farther in his self-denunciation than the social worker in his "preaching." The first necessity is to restore him to a condition of physical efficiency. Good food, sleep, rest and fresh air are

essential. When he is once more ready to take work his choice of a position becomes of utmost importance. Factors of his old environment may have been responsible for his downfall. If employment can be obtained where these factors do not exist, the next spree may be averted. Even if sprees continue, but the intervals between them are lessened, there is a net gain for society and the individual.

It may even be necessary to accept our patient's periodical necessity for drink as a fact, and attempt to arrange his employment so that it may be obtained without interference with his work. The following example is in point. A male stenographer with whom the writer is well acquainted lived for some time in a charitable institution where he was employed. Because the head of the institution was both employer and landlord, sobriety and good behaviour on seven days per week were required of employes. Each few weeks brought the stenographer's inevitable fall from grace. Finally, when all interested in his case despaired, he obtained a position with a commercial house where employers cared nothing for his habits outside of working hours. For two years he has continued to give good satisfaction to this firm, has not missed a day and has received promotions. The interval between Saturday noon and Monday morning has been sufficient to enable him to follow a drinking schedule that has not interfered with his work.

The writer views pragmatically the question of religious influences in the case of drinking men and women. Without doubt there have been many complete and successful "conversions." On the other hand, I have known a number of men who were most devout testimony-givers at mission services who were elsewhere loud in their blasphemy and religious ridicule. Likewise, I have known deeply religious men to be hopeless inebriates. Where early environment affords a basis of appeal, religious instincts may prove an effective starting point for rehabilitation.

Applications are continually received at the Municipal Lodging House of New York from hospital convalescents, pre-confinement cases and dispensary patients. The first have often been discharged prematurely from over-crowded hospitals. The second and third ought many times to be admitted to a hospital but are excluded for the same reason. In the meantime the problem is forced upon agencies for the homeless.

These cases emphasize the necessity for a competent medical examiner on the staff of the agency for homeless. Our Municipal Lodging House physician must continually assume the rôle of an advocate. He must prove clinically, and sometimes dialectically, that certain homeless inmates are sufficiently ill to make their admission to the hospital imperative. This situation is vaguely understood by many of our homeless applicants, who come to us requesting to be sent to hospitals. Convalescent, dispensary and maternity cases should be provided with light work suited to their physical conditions. Great care is essential, however, lest overwork result.

THE CHRONICALLY DEPENDENT

Very few persons who have once become chronically dependent ever regain a place among the self-supporting. The result is possible by intensive personal work with a minor number of cases. The study at present being given to the problem of reabsorbing war-cripples into industry will doubtless shed much light on the possibilities of rehabilitation of certain types of chronic dependents. "Shell shock" and battle wounds undoubtedly have their counterparts in occupational disease and industrial accidents. The development of plans for training war-wrecked men and finding employment openings suited to their individual handicaps, will be of quite the same advantage to men who have been similarly wrecked in the struggles of peace.

The aged and infirm are conspicuous among the chronically dependent. It is customary to consign them promiscuously to the almshouse. Yet many of them to avoid this "disgrace" are attempting under terrible handicaps to remain self-supporting. Employment may be found for some in positions where age is no great detriment. The first placement made by the Employment Bureau of the New York Municipal Lodging House was of an elderly woman who was to have been sent to the almshouse. She is still in this position. There are many such cases.

In spite of these possibilities of delaying the inevitable approach of death or complete dependency, the majority of the aged and infirm men and women who appear at institutions for the homeless must be sent to the homes for aged and infirm. A great deal of tact, good judgment and sympathy is often necessary to persuade these pitiful individuals that this is their only possibility.

Men and women with physical handicaps are infrequently doing the work for which they are actually best fitted. A man who lacks an arm or fingers may be trying to make a living by trucking in a freight house. Men with weak eyes register for positions as clerks. The struggle for existence is severe and discouraging for those who are thus handicapped, and who have no one to guide them into employment for which they are better suited. Great care is required to prevent them from following the easy road into mendicancy,—a road continually opened by the unthinking but well-intentioned almsgiving of the public.

A desirable readjustment of employment may sometimes be made in a placement agency. The weak-eyed clerical worker may be led to discover that he is adapted to employment where the intensive use of sight is not essential. The one-armed longshoreman may be given work as a watchman where the loss of an arm is not an important disqualification. If the handicap be serious and the individual discouraged or unenterprising, however, the assistance of special agencies may be necessary. The New York Lighthouse for the Blind, The Association for the Aid of Crippled Children and The Old Men's Toy Shop maintained by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor have demonstrated something of what may be accomplished in readjusting the lives of the handicapped.

Mental deficiencies are responsible for much chronic dependency. Many instances might be cited of morons and even medium grade imbeciles, aimlessly drifting from one social agency to another over extended periods of time, without any attention being paid to their mental conditions.

During the early spring of 1914 the writer lived for a number of days in the New York Municipal Lodging House disguised as a homeless applicant. While he was employed one morning upon one of the institutional "work details" to which he was assigned, his attention was attracted by a boy whose physical degeneracy and mental feebleness seemed apparent at the most casual glance. The boy stated that he was twenty-one years of age and had just been put out of his father's home in Long Island City. His responses showed the mental development of a child. Two years later, after the writer had become Superintendent of the Municipal Lodging House, the self-same boy was observed one night at our registration

window. Inquiry developed the amazing fact that for these two years he had been drifting about the streets of New York, working at occasional odd jobs, a frequent applicant at social agencies. Yet never in that time had any one taken the trouble to have his mentality tested. The mental clinic to which he was subsequently sent classed him as an imbecile with a mental age of six years!

Whenever mental deficiencies in a patient are clearly established, institutional care under strict supervision is the only satisfactory solution. But the insufficient capacity of appropriate institutions renders the solution unavailable in multitudes of cases. When the commitment to institutions of morons and harmless psychopaths has been impossible, we have found it of value to send them to employment in menial capacities in public hospitals with the full coöperation of the hospital authorities. Although employes, they are then under an informal supervision by superiors of professional experience.

Where habits of drink appear to be the predominant factor among the causes of chronic dependency, we must again turn to institutional treatment as offering the only probability of cure. But available facilities for homeless inebriates are even less adequate than facilities for the feeble-minded. The City of New York provides a farm colony for inebriates and drug addicts at Warwick. This is the only public establishment in New York where farm colony treatment for inebriety may be obtained. Yet it has a permanent capacity for one hundred men only. The Municipal Lodging House could furnish this number of men who need its method of treatment on almost any day of the week!

Mental deficiency, illiteracy and alcoholism are sometimes combined together, in varying degree, in a single homeless individual. No one of the three factors may be sufficiently pronounced to make possible specialized treatment for that handicap alone. Yet in combination they produce an individual of general incompetence who seems quite hopeless as a subject for constructive effort. Many of these general incompetents are the products of child-caring "homes." Condemned to institutional existence at the beginning of their lives, as adults they appear to have no potentialities for anything better. Some were constitutionally inferior at the start. They have insufficient ambition or persistence to follow of their own volition any program which they, or someone

for them, may outline. Forceable commitment to a farm colony and vocational school constructed after the Swiss type would offer the best means of benefiting the individual and making him self-supporting. There is idle agricultural land in abundance for such colonies, while the importance of increasing our agricultural output gives a powerful additional argument for their establishment.

Proposals for the creation of such colonies were made in New York last spring. The proposals contemplated the use of the Municipal Lodging House as a clearing center from which individuals in need of farm colony treatment would be presented to the magistrates' courts and by them committed on indeterminate sentences to the farm colony.

THE PARASITIC

Many men and women, normally self-supporting and independent, will become temporarily parasitic under certain circumstances. The migratory worker en route to the harvest fields is an illustration. Valuable and respected employes of the Municipal Lodging House when drinking have been seen begging promiscuously upon the streets.

A large minority of homeless men, therefore, are occasional beggars, as well as occasional applicants for charitable assistance. But the professional mendicant is seldom seen at charitable agencies. He is invariably "wise," and can "work the public" much better. Furthermore, his income is usually sufficient for his support.

The need or desire for obtaining money without work is undoubtedly the initial occasion for mendicancy. But this desire soon becomes only one of the impulses which keep beggars at the trade. Mendicancy has its roots in gambling instincts and it satisfies a certain craving for adventure. The constant possibility of a large gratuity, the never ending speculation as to the next benefactor, the fascinating game of "hide and seek" with the police, all give to the mendicant's life a daily feverish adventure, the counterpart of which is found only in gambling, prospecting, and other hazardous occupations.

Since a thirst for adventure in the mendicant's soul is satisfied by his manner of living, no mere assurance of a livelihood equal to or exceeding that which he obtains from begging will suffice to

wean him away from it. Only a legitimate occupation offering the equivalent in chance and adventure will serve the purpose. Many street trades do offer an approach to this equivalent. A news-stand where the crowds are surging past may prove the means of restoring the mendicant to productive life. In the cases where age or extreme physical handicaps render self-supporting employment impossible, the mendicant must be committed to an alms-house. Severe measures, if necessary, are justified to break up the wasteful and fraudulent practice of street begging.

The "I won't work," at least among the lower strata of society, is largely a popular superstition. I have seen very few men, not classed as mendicants, vagrant psychopaths or mental defectives, who would not work under conditions which they considered to be just. Not long ago it was generally believed that some men and women preferred unemployment, homelessness and hunger to honest labor. This opinion seems to have been definitely abandoned by thinking people. In January, 1915, 2,500 homeless dependents were sheltered in the Municipal Lodging House of New York each night. This population was reduced within eighteen months to little more than 100 per night. The same relative reduction occurred in similar institutions throughout the country. It is very evident that the great majority of the alleged "I won't works" of three years ago secured work and are still employed. Yet this rule, like all others, is occasionally proved by its exceptions. It is sometimes found necessary to refuse the privileges of the Municipal Lodging House to men and women who will not avail themselves of honest opportunities for employment.

The charity rounder, the last of the parasitic types which I have particularized, is usually a rounder because he has never learned to do anything effectively. He follows the easiest way. When placed at some simple task within his experience and intelligence, he may serve faithfully and well over considerable periods of time. Definite training for simple tasks, followed up by careful supervision when employment is obtained, may definitely remove him from the parasitic class.

The methods of case treatment described above are crude and undeveloped. We have hardly gone further than attempts to define our problem. Among the human gains that may come from the world war, will be new and better methods for the treatment

of the homeless. For still greater gains may we hope: that out of the slaughter may come a new estimate of the value of human life; that homelessness as a condition demanded of workers in return for existence may be banished; that the right to normal living may become imbedded in the social conscience of our people.